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ABSTRACT

This presentation recalls the goals of the State University of New York (SUNY) Assessment Initiative and the Provost's charge to the Task Force on the Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes and then summarizes the Task Force's core recommendations and the Implementation Guidelines established by the Office of the Provost. Also described is the implementation of the General Education assessment on SUNY campuses. In fall 1999, the Provost established the Task Force on the Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes as a broadly representative committee of faculty, administration, and staff and charged it to examine and discuss the issues involved in implementing undergraduate student learning outcomes assessment and to make recommendations for such an assessment. The Task Force recommended that the Assessment Initiative should consist of both campus-based and University-wide strategies with campus-based assessment focused primarily on program improvement and University-wide assessment used primarily to serve accountability and advocacy functions. The General Education assessment is being implemented across the 64 campuses of the SUNY system according to the principles of the Task Force recommendations. (SLD)

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The SUNY Assessment Initiative

A presentation for the

Academic Standards Committee
of the SUNY Board of Trustees

by

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and

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April 10, 2001

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Dr. Steven's Remarks:

Thank you Trustee de Russy for inviting me and my colleague Dr. Patricia Francis to join you today.

I would like to begin our presentation by briefly recalling the goals of the SUNY Assessment Initiative and the Provost's charge to the Task Force on the Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes. I will then summarize the Task Force's core recommendations as well as the Implementation Guidelines established by the Office of the Provost. Dr. Francis will speak to you in greater detail regarding the implementation of General Education assessment on our campuses. When she has finished her presentation, we would be pleased to answer your questions.

Goals

At a time when the State University is actively working toward a stronger, even more prominent position in the front ranks of American public higher education, one of our top priorities is improving the quality of undergraduate education. We have a responsibility to our students, to the State of New York, and to all constituencies of the University to set a standard of excellence in this area that meets and ultimately exceeds those of our national peers.

It is by widely recognized that a robust and comprehensive program for assessing student learning outcomes is a key aspect of initiatives intended to improve learning. National and regional accrediting bodies now insist that institutions implement outcomes assessment. In New York State, the State Education Department has recently proposed that:

> *The Board of Regents should require each degree-granting college and university to engage in ongoing, systematic assessment of its educational effectiveness and to use the results of its assessments to improve its quality and effectiveness. To satisfy this requirement, every institution should have a comprehensive educational effectiveness*

plan and evidence of its use, which should be made available to the Commissioner upon request.

It is important to know that the SUNY Assessment Initiative is not only based on sound pedagogical premises, but that it both meets and exceeds SED mandates. Indeed, it holds the promise, I believe, of becoming a national model for assessment. The SUNY Assessment Initiative is comprehensive, rigorous, effective, and respectful of the longstanding tradition of faculty governance that is a hallmark of America's world-class system of higher education. Indeed, I am very pleased to tell you that the Middle States Commission on Higher Education has asked to link its Web page on Best Practices in Outcomes Assessment to the SUNY Task Force report.

Charge

In fall 1999, Provost Salins established an Advisory Task Force on the Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes as a broadly representative committee comprised of faculty, administration, and staff from across the University, and charged it to:

- Examine and discuss the issues involved in implementing undergraduate student learning outcomes assessment today—specifically, in the context of a large and diverse university system such as the State University of New York,

and to make recommendations regarding:

- A process for assessing student learning outcomes and intellectual growth in General Education and the Major that will provide the faculty and academic leadership with an important and effective way of improving the quality of undergraduate education, and the University with a coherent and meaningful longitudinal data base with which to be accountable to its stakeholders.

Process

The Task Force began its work in November 1999 and delivered its report a year later. At every step, it endeavored to keep the University community fully informed and took every opportunity to meet with the University Faculty Senate, the Faculty Council of Community Colleges, academic vice presidents, vice presidents of student affairs, and other interested groups. The Task Force was determined to maintain a transparent and collegial process, so as to be able to develop recommendations that would find broad support. Although not everyone or group is in agreement with all of its recommendations, generally speaking I think it would be fair to say that the Task Force report has been well-received throughout the University.

Major Recommendations

The Task Force believes that assessment serves two complementary functions in higher education today: "Assessment as improvement" and "Assessment as accountability," and that both of these functions have an appropriate place in the SUNY Assessment Initiative and can strengthen the University's institutions and the system as a whole.

The Task Force's recognition of these two functions of assessment is directly reflected in the recommendation that:

- The SUNY Assessment Initiative should consist of both campus-based and University-wide strategies, with campus-based assessment focused primarily on program improvement and University-wide assessment used primarily to serve accountability and advocacy functions.

The emphasis on assessment as a means of improving student learning is clearly in the best interests of faculty, who have a real stake in knowing whether their teaching is effective in promoting learning. Effective assessment has also the salutary effect of enhancing the academic reputation of our campuses and the State University as a whole.

Importantly as well, as a publicly supported institution, SUNY has a responsibility to demonstrate to its many stakeholders, including especially its Board of Trustees, that it is fulfilling its mission. The accountability mandates recommended by the Task Force and implemented by the Office of the Provost for all aspects of this initiative fulfil this responsibility.

In forging its report and in making its recommendations, the Task Force was committed to respecting the diversity of our State University institutions, especially their unique missions and governance and curriculum processes.

The Task recommends that each campus be responsible for determining the particular structure and content of its campus-based General Education assessment plan, that these plans be developed and implemented primarily by faculty members who teach in the program, and that they be submitted to and approved by the campus' Faculty Senate or Faculty Council.

Further, the Task Force recommends that campus plans be reviewed and approved by a group of University faculty, chief academic officers, and representatives from System Administration. We have already begun to implement this important aspect of the SUNY Assessment Initiative, as Dr. Francis will describe shortly.

Although campus-based assessment is the focus of the SUNY Assessment Initiative, the Task Force believes that there is an appropriate place for University-wide assessment as well. Information derived from University-wide assessment will be used primarily by System Administration for accountability purposes—enabling it to report on the status of General Education outcomes in SUNY as a whole—and to advocate on behalf of the University. The Task Force recommends that:

- University-wide assessment periodically assess, using common measures, a representative sample of students from across SUNY in order to gauge students' attainment in the learning outcomes in Mathematics, Basic Communication, Critical Thinking (Reasoning), Information Management, and the understanding of the methods scientists and social scientists use to explore phenomena.

University-wide assessment is complex, and the Task Force recommends that "campuses should have sufficient time to develop and implement their own assessment programs before implementation of University-wide assessment proceeds." The Office of the Provost will follow the Task Force's recommendation and work with campuses to develop a solid format of campus-based assessment across the University before beginning to tackle the more challenging concept of University-wide assessment envisioned in the Task Force report.

With respect to campus-based assessment of the major, the Task Force recommends that assessment of academic programs take place every five to seven years, and that it incorporate external review whenever feasible.

- Each year institutions will submit a report to System Administration providing a summary of the academic programs that underwent review during that year and the major findings, as well as a listing of programs scheduled for review during the next academic year.

One of the most fundamental aspects of rigorous assessment that needs to be embraced is an understanding that assessment is not evaluation, nor is it competition. Assessment is a process, first and foremost, for understanding and improving student learning. The Task Force therefore makes the following recommendations with respect to the utilization and reporting of assessment data:

- Stringent guidelines should be developed and adhered to in order to ensure that confidentiality of assessment data is maintained.
- Assessment results should never be used to punish, publicly compare, or embarrass students, faculty, courses, programs, departments, or institutions either individually or collectively, or to make public comparisons among groups of students based on gender, race, ethnicity, or other demographic factors.
- System Administration should publicly disseminate assessment data only through aggregate reporting for SUNY as a whole, or by sector.

In December 2000, the Office of the Provost issued Implementation Guidelines for campus-based assessment.

The implementation of campus-based General Education assessment has now begun and will be fully in place by Fall 2002, in time to make an initial assessment of the progress of those students who will be the first to complete the SUNY General Education Requirement in spring 2003.

Implementation of campus-based assessment of the Major will begin in fall 2001.

Finally, I would like to add that, in developing and implementing the SUNY Assessment Initiative, we have been especially cognizant of our responsibility, as the largest university system in the nation, to embrace strategies and processes that exemplify—and perhaps establish—best practices in American higher education, for nationally our actions will be closely watched. Everyone will look to us to see if we can manage to work through all of this collegially to forge an educationally meaningful assessment process that will also satisfy accountability mandates.

I would like now to ask Dr. Patricia Francis, Professor of Psychology, Executive Assistant to the President of SUNY Cortland, and my colleague and co-chair of the Task Force and the General Education Assessment Review group to speak you in greater detail regarding the implementation of General Education assessment on our campuses.

Dr Francis' Remarks:

Thank you. I too appreciate the opportunity to report today on the SUNY Assessment Initiative. As Dr. Steven indicates, this project has the potential to have an unprecedented impact on the higher education community nationwide, and this is an especially exciting time as we actually begin to implement the recommendations of the Task Force on the Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes.

GEAR Group

My role today is to describe in some detail the implementation of General Education assessment across SUNY's 64 campuses, focusing in particular on the work done to this point by the body charged in the Task Force Report to oversee this implementation process. This body, the General Education Assessment Review (GEAR) group, was formed this past February for the express purpose of providing "initial and ongoing review" of campuses' general education assessment plans. Membership was determined jointly by leadership from System Administration, the University Faculty Senate, and the Community College Faculty Council, and is comprised primarily of faculty. Additional members include Dr. Steven, a campus chief academic officer, and several Institutional Research staff to provide necessary direction and support with respect to testing and evaluation issues. A small subset of the Task Force on the Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes was included on the GEAR group to provide continuity between that group's efforts and future activities.

General Education Assessment Conference

Since its formation the GEAR Group has focused almost exclusively on planning and coordinating a University-wide conference on general education assessment to be held in June. At its final meeting last fall, the Task Force on the Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes agreed that such an event would serve a critical function in launching campus-based assessment of general education, providing direction and support as campuses began or continued to develop their assessment plans. Each SUNY campus has been invited to send two representatives to this conference, which is entitled "Campus-Based Assessment of General Education: A Collaborative Dialogue" and which is being funded almost exclusively by System Administration. This event will include detailed sessions on the discrete steps involved in developing and implementing an effective assessment plan, and will feature a number of institutions from within and outside the State University that have demonstrated innovative and successful approaches to general education assessment. One institution from outside SUNY to be represented, Truman State University, is nationally known for using assessment to transform itself from an admittedly

"average" liberal arts institution to the Missouri State System's honors college. In addition to providing direction to SUNY campuses as they endeavor to meet the timeline described earlier by Dr. Steven, the June conference sends the important message that System Administration is making assessment a priority and is willing to commit necessary resources for this purpose.

Principles and Implementation of Campus-Based General Education Assessment

Let me now turn to a brief discussion of the principles the GEAR group will follow in meetings its responsibilities as outlined in the Task Force report. First and foremost, the GEAR group intends to function as a colleague and resource to campuses as they make progress on their campus-based plans for assessing student learning outcomes in General Education, making ourselves available as they feel it would be most helpful. As specified in the Task Force report, the GEAR group's evaluation of campus assessment plans will be a "process review," focusing exclusively on a campus' processes and procedures for assessing general education, not on the outcomes of its assessment.

Initial Review Process by Gear Group

It is important to note, however, that this process review will be comprehensive and rigorous, utilizing as a fundamental criterion for each campus assessment plan the inclusion of appropriate standards of excellence for assessing the student learning outcomes outlined in the *Implementation Guidelines*. In addition to this fundamental criterion, assessment plans must be judged by the GEAR group in its initial review of these plans to satisfactorily include the following components:

- Clearly-stated goals and objectives for the plan, including strategies for assessing the learning outcomes delineated in the *Implementation Guidelines*
- A description of the activities that relate to, and are likely to result in, the achievement of the campus's programmatic goals and objectives
- Identification of the assessment measures and criteria to be utilized in determining the extent to which students are meeting the program's goals and objectives

- A description of the process to be used in using assessment results to improve the program as appropriate

As Dr. Steven noted earlier, these criteria meet or exceed standards established by SED as well as by Middle States, allowing institutions to meet multiple accreditation and certification requirements simultaneously.

As outlined in the Task Force report, the GEAR group will receive and critique campus-based assessment plans according to the timeline already described. Based on these reviews, the GEAR group will approve plans that meet established criteria or recommend specific changes to campuses whose plans need improvement, with written copies of all reviews sent simultaneously to campuses and to System Administration. Also as a part of this initial review process, the GEAR group will work with campuses to develop a clear protocol, consistent with Task Force recommendations, for campuses to use in reporting their assessment results to System Administration for the purpose of accountability.

Ongoing Review Process by GEAR Group

After a campus' general education assessment plan has been initially reviewed and approved, the GEAR group will conduct biennial reviews of each plan to ensure that assessment is ongoing and that campuses are using assessment data in a continuing fashion to make program improvements as appropriate. Review criteria will be identical to those utilized in the initial review process, although special scrutiny will be given to how campuses are applying their assessment data to change their programs. This relative emphasis is consistent with the recommendations of external accrediting and certification agencies, including Middle States. The ongoing review process of campus-based general education will be conducted on a staggered basis in order to relieve the administrative burden to some extent.

Ensuring Standards of Excellence and Accountability

A final topic I will address involves the mechanisms and processes that are in place to assure that the Task Force's plan for assessing campus-based assessment plans is characterized by the highest standards of excellence and levels of accountability. Of course, the primary responsibility for this assurance rests with the GEAR group, since this body will determine the extent to which campus-based assessment plans are consistent with national best assessment practices and approve plans on that basis. This group is also charged to monitor assessment plans in an ongoing fashion for the purpose of ensuring that high assessment standards are maintained and that assessment data are being used appropriately to make program improvements, with full reports of all assessment plan reviews submitted to System Administration.

The GEAR group has the additional and important obligation as delineated in the Task Force report to take into account the diversity that exists across the 64 SUNY campuses with respect to mission and curriculum and governance processes. While this obligation does serve to make a complex task even more complicated, it is an essential component of the SUNY Assessment Initiative's ultimate success. By demonstrating respect for and understanding of each campus' distinctiveness in reviewing its assessment plan, we greatly enhance the probability that institutions will participate fully and even enthusiastically in this process, and that they in turn will generate the faculty and staff buy-in that is so critical to effective program assessment.

Finally, additional mechanisms in place for ensuring that standards of excellence are maintained include the provision that campuses submit to System Administration an annual report summarizing their general education assessment findings for that year. As stated earlier, this report will follow a standardized format developed jointly by the campuses and System Administration. Further, the Task Force recommendations indicate that these reports include at a minimum the percentage of students who exceed, meet, approach, or do not meet the campus' assessment plan standards for particular student learning outcomes.

To conclude my part of the presentation, I will simply state what I believe is obvious: The SUNY Assessment Initiative establishes a remarkably and admirably ambitious agenda that is fraught with challenge and promise. While much hard work remains ahead, I concur with my colleague Dr. Steven that this project holds the promise of becoming a model for institutions and university systems across the nation. It has been a privilege to be a part of this project to this point, and I look forward to moving on to the next step.

Both Dr. Steven and I would now welcome your comments and questions.

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